

BBC NEWS

UK 'discriminated against Roma'

The government's immigration rules discriminated on racial grounds against Roma (Gypsies) seeking entry into the UK, the Law Lords have ruled.

It follows a Home Office move to cut asylum claims by stopping people, mostly Roma, from boarding flights to Britain from the Czech capital Prague.

Civil rights group Liberty said it exposed "racism at the heart of the government's asylum policy."

The message was, "Roma not welcome in UK," director Shami Chakrabarti said.

'Systematic discrimination'

The Home Office began the screening at the airport in July 2001 at a time of concern about the number of asylum seekers entering Britain.

Those refused "pre-clearance" to the UK were effectively prevented from travelling to the UK, because no airline would carry them.

Liberty took up the case of six unnamed Roma Czechs refused entry to Britain and the European Roma Rights Centre which said the measures unfairly penalised Roma people.

It lost a High Court action in October 2002 when the judge said the system was "no more or less objectionable" than a visa control system.

He ruled there was no obligation on Britain under the 1951 Geneva Convention on Refugees not to take steps to prevent a potential refugee from approaching its border to claim asylum.

The Court of Appeal then decided the practice almost inevitably discriminated against Roma, but that this was justified because they were more likely to seek asylum than non-Romas.

Liberty legal adviser Megan Addis said the outcome of the judgement showed the practice constituted "systematic discrimination" against Roma people.

She pointed out that not all of the claimants represented by Liberty had wanted to seek asylum in Britain - one had been attempting to visit a family member.

BBC correspondent Mark Sanders said statistics showed that if you were a Roma Czech you were 400 times more likely to be stopped by British immigration officials at Prague airport than non-Roma Czechs.

There has been no comment on the ruling so far from the Home Office.

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